

This past June I had an encounter with a landscaper that I couldn't get out of my mind. I spent days thinking about it afterwards, and shared it with anyone who would listen. The conversation was with a guy who had been in my high school class. He started his own lawn care business after graduation, and has been taking care of my parents' yard for years. I had called him for a consult, to help with a few issues that were perplexing me.

One look at our terrible grass, and he was able to diagnose the problem and offer a solution. As soon as I told him that I had accidentally planted the apple trees in the shade, he had a suggestion for a place to relocate them. He easily pointed out the trees that needed to come down, the stages of work we could do, and the cost breakdown of installing a patio.

None of this was rocket science, but I was in awe. It is so rare that we get to watch someone excel at their craft, in a field that we know little to nothing about. In my day-to-day life, I might not be the expert in the room (we have a pretty knowledgeable community!) but we're often talking about Judaism, so I tend to, at the very least, have something to add to the conversation.

It was a real pleasure to watch someone be in their element, while I struggled to keep up. When I was stuck in "this grass looks ugly" mode, our landscaper was naming the 3 different types of grass plus some weeds we had growing together. He then quickly pivoted and told me that it was merely a simple treatment of (something something something) plus (something else that I didn't understand) and we would have a beautiful lawn. We trusted his judgement, and next time you drive by my house, well, after the snow melts, take a look at my beautifully green grass! (Don't look at the apple trees though, we haven't moved them yet!)

*L'havdil*, I imagine that this sense of awe at someone else's skill and mastery was similar to what Pharaoh experienced when he spoke with Joseph. Pharaoh had a problem - he couldn't quite articulate the problem, but he knew it was bad. The dread had seeped into his unconscious and was coming out by way of his dreams. He knew something dangerous was coming, but because he didn't know the details, he didn't know how to stop it. The threat was mounting, and without more information, there was no path forward. People were going to die - he could be one of them - and he was powerless.

Suddenly Joseph arrived on the scene and had concrete answers for Pharaoh. He was able to diagnose the problem and organize a solution. He offered a clear path forward, based in sound logic, that would stave off disaster. His plan was presented in a way that could benefit everyone, despite what we assume was a small sacrifice at the outset. Pharaoh trusted him, followed his instructions, and the entire population of Egypt was saved from what could have been a devastating famine. Thanks to this forethought and advanced planning, many lives were saved.

In far, FAR, less heroic ways, we all sometimes get to play the expert in the room. In my role as a rabbi, I often encounter disoriented and anxious people ahead of a lifecycle event. What feels simple and obvious to me - the order of a wedding ceremony, how to put on a tallit, or the process of mourning - is intimidating to others. In any variety of ways, I hope we each get the opportunity to put our hard earned knowledge towards solving a problem that others can't wrap their minds around.

When a family comes to Ava's dad to say that they're having a bat mitzvah and want A Perfect Taste to cater it, he gets to walk them

through all the options - sharing ideas and possibilities that never would have occurred to them on their own. When a parent confesses to their child's teacher that they're struggling to help their student at home, the teacher might have the opportunity to offer possible solutions. And when a country is facing an unprecedented pandemic, anxious and fearful because we don't know how to diagnose the problem, let alone stop it; turning to the experts and letting them forge a path forward is the answer.

As a parent with a kid in a Jewish day school, I received a letter this past week, from the doctors advising the Boston area Jewish day schools. The letter began by noting that all of the members of the committee were "current and former Jewish day school parents who are deeply invested in keeping our children and our schools safe." What followed were pretty standard recommendations for staying safe this winter.

But that one line jumped out at me. Like Joseph, whose own fate depended on the decisions that the Egyptian government made, these members of the advisory committee are throwing their own lot in with the rest of the communities.

Throughout the past 10 months, we've been guided and led by brilliant, thoughtful, and highly skilled doctors and scientists. We've seen them on the national level (and on cable news!) and we've experienced them locally, by way of our own PCPs or a medical committee advising the schools, synagogues, and camps that we love. Like Joseph, they were able to quickly assess the situation, offer logical solutions, and implement life-saving measures. And this week, the world got to experience a major moment in the healing process that is worth reflecting on.

When I think back to last March, I remember it as a time of tremendous anxiety and fear. Masks and social distancing weren't things yet. Hiding in our house, not encountering anyone was what we did. When I locked up my office on March 12, I didn't know when I'd be back. The biggest indicator, for me, that March was a lifetime ago, is that my work computer didn't even have Zoom downloaded on it!

To go from that to having the first vaccines administered in healthcare workers this week, 10 months later, is absolutely astounding. While many point to the awesome power of science, I see God's handiwork at work within those scientists.

This is a moment worth recognizing. And it is a moment worth bringing God into. When you get your vaccine, in the next few months - and I do hope that all who are eligible will get their vaccines - I hope you will take a moment to acknowledge the enormity of the moment. For those of you who are interested, I have created a short ritual to say before and after receiving your shot.

When I prepare to get my vaccine - perhaps as I get into the car to drive to the doctor's office, or when I wake up that morning and choose a shirt with sleeves that are easy to roll up, I will remind myself why I am so committed to getting the vaccine. On page 10 of our siddur, you can find the verse that I will say: "הריני מקבלת עליי: מצות הבורא: ואהות לרעך כמוך - I hereby accept the obligation of fulfilling my Creator's mitzvah in the Torah: Love your neighbor as yourself.

This vaccine serves a dual purpose. Yes, it will protect those of us who get it. But that is not the only reason why it is worth getting vaccinated. In protecting ourselves, we are helping to stop the

spread of COVID-19 and taking care of those around us. We are quite literally loving our neighbor, protecting them from illness, in the same way that we are loving ourselves.

Based on a line in the Talmud, in Brachot 60a, a colleague has created the following prayer:

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵי שְׂיֵהָא עֶסֶק זָה לִי לְרִפּוּאָה, וּתְרַפְּאֵנִי.

כִּי אֵל רּוֹפֵא נִאֶמֶן אַתָּה וּרְפּוּאָתְךָ אֶמֶת.

May it be Your will, Heavenly Healer, that this endeavor be for healing and may You grant healing to me, to my loved ones, to my nation, and to all who are in need. Fill me with a sense of gratitude for all who create, distribute, and deliver this vaccine, and for all those who work for the health of individuals and our communities. Empower me to care in good health ever more deeply for others. Blessed are You, Holy One, Healer of all flesh, sustaining our bodies in wondrous ways.

-Rabbi Aaron Starr, based on BT Brachot 60a and Birkot HaShachar

I will say that blessing in the moments before receiving the shot. And finally, after receiving the vaccine, what would that moment be without a Shechyanu? For it truly is only with God's help have we made it to this moment.

It may have been decades since I last cried when getting a shot - but I expect the tears to be flowing this time. Tears of relief, of joy, of awe, and of gratitude. Shabbat Shalom.